

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women

Dartmouth Public Hearing
Wednesday, June 6, 2007, 5:30 – 7:00 p.m.
UMass Dartmouth, Woodland Commons

Hearing Minutes

Attendees: Lee Blake, Shelly Correia, Priscilla Ditchfield, Kate Fentress, Gail Fortes, Maria Fortes, Lorraine Khazan, Leslye Kornegay, Arlene McHamee, Eileen Merrim, Carol Meyer, Maria Mojica, Michelle Nogueira, Kathy Norns, Juli Parker, Joanne Rego, Maria Rosario, Sheehan, Gloria Williams

Commissioners: Ruth Bramson, Gloria Coney, Linda Cavaoli, Helen Corbett, Liz Houlihan, Carol Pimentel

Staff: Jill Ashton, Linda Brantley, Paula Daddona, Intern: Claire Hsu

Welcome and Introductions

Chair Houlihan opened the meeting by welcoming the attendees and introducing the present members of the Commission. She briefly reviewed the current issues of concern raised in previous hearings including wage equity, housing, and transportation, noting that commissioners look forward to hearing what the present attendees had to say.

Testimony

Chair Houlihan, opening the floor for testimony, noted that the Commission would listen to the remarks and report to legislators.

Shelly Correia from HarbOUR House addressed the great need for more affordable housing. She relayed that many are ready for their own houses (not necessarily transitional services) Ms. Correia also advocated for more access to GED services.

Eileen Marrim, a graduate student of Public Policy at UMass Dartmouth noted she had just finished an internship with the town of Easton and explained their plans for affordable housing. She requested further clarification on the information that Ms. Correia offered. Ms. Correia responded that it was contingent upon annual income and full cost adding that most affordable housing has 2 bedrooms (starter homes, not appropriate for full fledged families). Ms. Marrim reported that some professors of Stonehill College seek affordable housing.

Carol Meyer of the College of Nursing brought to the Commission's attention the increasing incidence of post partum depression. She noted the adverse affect this has on children, acknowledging the direct relationship between stimuli and development and that children of such parents will most likely be deprived of this essential component of healthy early years. Also, she asked whether or not this was something that should or is the purview of insurance or perhaps follow up care.

Gail Fortes, Executive Director of the YWCA of Southeastern MA addressed the issue of the recent immigration raids and how they predominantly affected women. She shared a story of how one woman fell and broke her leg and how she suffered in silent solitude for three days

before calling the YWCA because she was so frightened. Fortes explained that when she sought assistance none was offered her by the immigration fund as the woman had no children. In the end the woman will be sent back to El Salvador.

Ms. Fortes went on to address the issue of illegal immigrants generally stating that this is not a small issue, that they are many, and that they pay taxes. Solutions are difficult as they don't come forward because they're scared that their illegal status may become exposed.

Ms. Fortes also addressed the issue of homelessness in New Bedford, stating that rents have gotten out of control due to recent gentrification, leading housing to cost \$700-800 a month for a 1-2 bedroom apartment. She then went on to relate the issue of housing available to the elderly.

Continuing, Ms. Fortes spoke about CORI reform, noting many women cannot pass the CORI for minor infractions committed 15-20 years ago. Thus these women cannot be accepted into a CNA program, or transition to a self sustaining job.

Another attendee suggested that supporting ratification of CORI was the best course of action, that criminal categories should be weighed, noting that the current system of an eternal debt to society ultimately results in excess burden, both by stifling the workforce and by disabling the previous perpetrator.

Ms. Fortes then spoke to the issue of healthcare, indicating there is a problem if girls are getting pregnant so as to qualify for healthcare, housing, food, and education. Shifting to education, Ms. Fortes criticized the zero tolerance policy at New Bedford Schools claiming that the alternative schools are not sufficient. She claimed shifting students to alternative schools and tracking students very early on ensures that failure is surely imminent. Also, Ms. Fortes criticized the manner in which teachers responded to the MCAS, stating that they teach to the test and that this is no way to provide students with an education.

Commissioner Coney asked about the racial breakdown of the schools. Ms. Fortes responded that the "minority" Latino population is growing. Another attendee brought attention to the significant dropout rates and the tendency to shift underperforming students out of the schools and into the factories.

There was discussion amongst attendees concerning the hiring process of the new school superintendent, noting flaws they perceived. Some felt that an entrenched "old boys network" does not well serve the currently community population.

Ms. Meyer spoke about the rising caesarian birthrate. She explained that learning problems are inherent. Also, she went on to explain that once a woman has an operative birth, all subsequent births must be operative and women aren't told that the total number of children they can have is reduced. Therefore women are increasingly unsatisfied with their birth experiences. Ms. Meyer suggested that in some cases the first caesarian is for operative convenience alone. Ms. Meyer offered the threat of malpractice in our litigious society as serving as a possible pressure and explanation for such behavior on the part of the doctor.

Juli Parker of the UMass Dartmouth Women's Center addressed transportation, noting that there's only one bus route and that it stops at 6 p.m. She criticized the manner in which this restricts women from both attending college and seeking preferable employment. Also, Ms. Parker noted that the cities of Fall River and New Bedford are not conveniently connected. Although there's a possibility of a train, the fact that it's in the distant future coupled with the threat of additional delays or even cancellation due to administration change even further. It discourages any hope for sufficient transportation to Boston and within the community any time soon. Ms. Parker then went on to note additional problems with the transportation system: that there's no Sunday schedule, dropping kids off at childcare is nearly impossible due to the infrequency of buses, and that disabilities are not adequately provided for.

Kate Fentress, Executive Director of the Women's Fund of Southeastern MA suggested the model of the Colorado Childcare Hub System in which non-redeemable vouchers for private childcare providers would be replaced by a central site at which vouchers could be redeemed thereby alleviating the pressure of parents to drop sick children off at childcare centers. Later Commissioner Cavaoli recommended the drop in respite system, a Greater Worcester Community Foundation proposal to respond to the unmet need for childcare for women working and living in transitional housing by using the facilities of the local YWCA in providing a central location where such women can obtain free, short-term, partial day childcare.

One attendee proposed the solution to ill children of a special at home care corps, however, Commissioner Coney explained that this was already available, just highly expensive. Fortes discussed how the negative media image of the area inhibits growth and development and that there's a need to promote a more positive image.

Adourn Chair Houlihan thanked attendees for their participation and contributions. The hearing adjourned at 7:10 p.m.